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ARCHÆOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

OF THE

NIYA RIVER.

BY

M. A. STEIN.

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NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE NIYA RIVER.

By M. A. STEIN.

SINCE effecting the exploration of ancient sites around Khotan and in the Taklamakan, of which a brief preliminary notice was given in the last number of the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, I have moved eastward to *Keriya* and *Niya*. Certain indications had led me to look for archaeologically interesting remains in the desert north of the shrine of Imām Jafar Sadik, where the *Niya* River loses itself in the sands. The excavations I have been able to carry on there for the last three weeks have more than justified my expectations.

Over an area of several square miles, once irrigated from the *Niya* River and still showing the traces of ancient orchards and poplar avenues, there lie scattered ruins of wooden structures, old dwelling-houses, and Buddhist monasteries, now half-buried in the sand-dunes. They have yielded an abundant supply of epigraphical and other relics, which are likely to prove of considerable importance, both for the Indologist and the student of early Central-Asian history.

The largest and perhaps most interesting part of these finds consists of over half a thousand documents written on wooden tablets in the *Kharoshthī* script, peculiar to the extreme North-West of ancient India. The palaeographic features of the writing agree closely with those exhibited by

the Kharoshthī inscriptions of the time of the Indo-Scythian or *Kushana* kings, who ruled the Punjab and adjoining regions during the first and second centuries of our era. Numismatic and other evidence helps to prove that this ancient settlement must have been abandoned about that period. The language of the documents is an early form of *Prakrit*, similar to that which appears on the earliest known coins of Khotan with bilingual (Indian and Chinese) legends, and also in the famous fragments of an ancient birch-bark manuscript from Khotan called after that ill-fated traveller, M. Dutreuil de Rhins.

Owing to the cursive character of the writing and for other reasons, the thorough decipherment of these records will require much time and patient labour. The necessarily rapid examination I have so far been able to make of them suffices, however, to show the great variety and historical interest of the contents. Tablets containing correspondence, private or official, prevail. They are wedge-shaped or oblong, and of varying sizes. Very often they still retain the clay seals attached to them and the strings with which they were fastened. Ingeniously fitted covering tablets, which served the purpose of envelopes, bear the address or 'docket' entries. Besides the mass of such tablets, there have come to light numerous tablets evidently containing Buddhist religious texts, prayers, votive records, etc. These tablets often unmistakeably imitate in shape the traditional form of Indian palm-leaf manuscripts, and accordingly show a respectable length, in some instances close on three feet. In addition, there has been found in the different buildings a mass of miscellaneous 'papers' (to use an anachronism), with memoranda, accounts, and similar contents. Many of the tablets bear exact dates, the years being indicated with reference to different reigns.

The great majority of the tablets, having been buried sufficiently deep in the sand, are in a state of very fair preservation. Only those uncovered by the fierce Summer storms have been bleached or withered. The use of wood as writing material is attested in India by references in

very old texts, but only the extreme dryness of a Central-Asian desert could preserve for us these earliest specimens. Previous to the introduction of paper (of which not even the smallest scrap has turned up at this site), wood was undoubtedly the most readily available material in the region north of the Karakorum mountains, where the import of both palm-leaves and birch-bark from India must have been comparatively expensive.

But from one ancient rubbish-heap particularly rich in documents of all sorts there has come to light another writing material little suspected among a Buddhist and Indian-speaking population. About two dozens of Kharoshthī documents on parchment, mostly dated and apparently of official nature, prove that the Buddhists of this region had as little objection to the use of leather for writing purposes as the pious Brahmans of old Kashmir had to the leather bindings of their cherished Sanskrit codices.

The use of an Indian language in the vast majority of the documents discovered, when considered together with the eminently secular character of most of the latter, affords a striking confirmation of the old local tradition, recorded both by Chinese and Tibetan authorities, that the Khotan territory was conquered and colonized at an early time by immigrants from the North-Western Punjab. But the finds offer at the same time equally convincing proof of that early assertion of Chinese supremacy and influences at Khotan of which those records tell us. In clearing the rubbish-heap already referred to, a series of small Chinese tablets was discovered, as well as a Chinese seal impression. If the former prove to contain dates, their evidence will be particularly useful.

We have had already ample reason to assume that the direct or indirect influence of Greek art had spread far to the East from *Bactria* and the ancient *Ariana* or Afghanistan. But there is as yet little evidence available that would permit us exactly to fix the period of this influence. From this point of view the clay seals still found intact on

a number of tablets are of great interest. One frequently recurring seal, apparently of an official, shows a well-engraved *Pallas Athene*, with shield and Aegis; another, and larger one, a seated *Eros* of good Greek workmanship. On others, again, appear well-modelled portrait heads, etc.

In the ruins of more pretentious dwellings numerous specimens have been found of decorative wood-carving. Their style shows a close connection with that of the so-called Graeco-Buddhist sculptures from the ruined monasteries of *Yusufzai*, or *Gandhāra*, and the neighbouring trans-frontier tracts. These carvings, as well as the remnants of elaborate woven fabrics, still retaining their harmonious colours, attest the high development of local art industry. Household implements, samples of old pottery, glass and metal ware, and other finds of this kind will help to illustrate the culture which these regions, now partly overwhelmed by the desert, enjoyed about the commencement of our era. It was a culture mainly Indian, but bearing the impress of manifold influences, both from the Far East and the Classical West.

Camp, Taklamakan.

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